

## VI INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE REÑACA, CHILE

### A Personal Account of the VI International Conference on Easter Island and the Pacific

by Ann M. Altman

ON A VAST BAY, approximately half way down the coast of Chile, the city of Valparaíso and the resort towns of Viña del Mar and Reñaca lie side by side, running one into another and each extending back into the hills around the bay. Conference Town, the site of the meeting, is on the outskirts of Reñaca, and offers all the facilities required for a successful international conference in a pleasant park-like setting. Our conference was particularly successful thanks to the conspicuous attention paid to every last detail by José Miguel Ramírez of the Center for Rapa Nui Studies at the University of Valparaíso.

The conference opened with the unearthing of chickens from a traditional *umu* that had been built by some Rapanui members of the conference, who appeared not to feel the distinct chill in the evening air in their native garments. The conference was lubricated, from beginning to end, with wine and *pisco* sours and it closed to the songs of a small group of Chilean musicians.

Because there were two parallel sessions at all times, it was not possible to attend every session. Papers were presented in English or in Spanish, with simultaneous translation from one to another in every case.

A few presentations stand out in my memory and I shall mention them in the order that they were given. Atholl Anderson gave the introductory keynote address on the effects of remoteness and isolation on the prehistoric colonization of Polynesia, and his stimulating contributions to discussions of the origins of the Rapanui continued on Rapa Nui during the post-conference tour.

During the first session, Cultural Resource Management, Amanda Joy Bush demonstrated some of the problems associated with preservation of monuments on Rapa Nui by showing slides of a horse and a cow rubbing against important stone artifacts. Brett Shepardson put us in a more optimistic mood by discussing his archaeological workshop for Rapanui students. A most impressive and memorable presentation was made by the Secretary of the Council of Rapanui Culture, Clemente Hereveri-Te'ao. He emphasized how much researchers have gained from Rapa Nui and how little many of them have given back. He asked, in no uncertain terms, that everyone who has published work about research on Rapa Nui should

send copies of their work to the island. It seemed clear to me that, unless a positive response is made to this request, it may become harder for researchers to get permits to work on the island.

I missed the session on Western Polynesian and Micronesian Archaeology but got to know some of the speakers on the post-conference tour to Rapa Nui, for example, Christophe Sand from New Caledonia. He and other young researchers in the Pacific indicated to me that many islands are some way ahead of Rapa Nui in terms of participation in research projects and plans by the local people. This session included some of the interesting work by biochemists from New Zealand in which sequences of mitochondrial DNA from the Polynesian rat are being used to map the spread of such rats and, by analogy, people, across the Pacific.

The first talk in the Conservation session described a model example of collaboration with the Rapanui, in this case in the conservation and management of 'Orongo. I was not surprised to learn that Eduardo Villafranca, who worked with such sensitivity with the Rapanui at 'Orongo, has decades of experience working with indigenous peoples in Canada.

The highlights of the session on Rapanui archaeology were the pairs of talks by Terry Hunt, who blamed much of the deforestation of Rapa Nui on the Polynesian rat, for which the seeds of the originally prevalent palm trees are "like candy", and by Charles Love who discussed a plausible sequence of events during a probable two-stage collapse of Rapanui culture. Both Hunt and Love discussed Rapa Nui's *moai* roads and the details of Love's excavations were particularly tantalizing. As Love showed, the roads were carefully constructed, having a

concave cross-section.

Love told me that he has some new ideas about how the *moai* might have been moved along such roads but he would not discuss them until he has put them to the test. Wise man!

Christopher Stevenson discussed the project on which I worked with him as an Earthwatch volunteer, namely, his examination of lithic mulching in the Vaitea region of Rapa Nui. In the session on Paleo-Environments and Human Impact on Pacific Islands,

Juan Grau gave a fascinating presentation of the data that support his hypothesis that the original prehistoric palm on Rapa Nui was *Jubaea chilensis* (Molina). His presentation included a photograph of the coconuts produced by a single Chilean ranch. If just one ranch produced so many seeds, is it too much to imagine that some seeds floated all the way to Rapa Nui?

Andreas Mieth and Hans-Rudolf Bork followed Grau with a wonderful talk about their discoveries on Poike, a part



Those bone guys, Vince Stefan (left) and George Gill sharing a conference coffee break with EIF's Georgia Lee.



Grant McCall, telling it like it is.



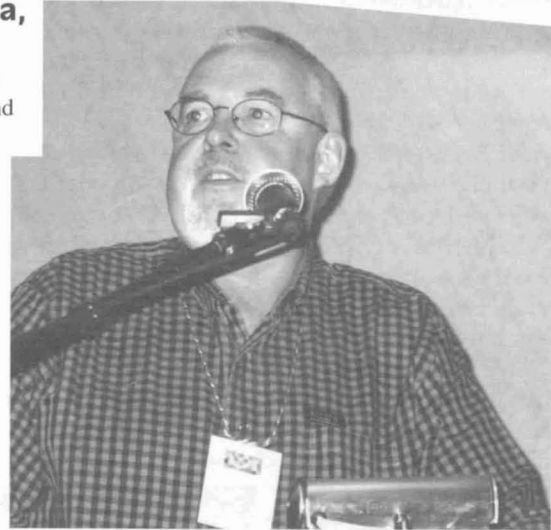
**Scenes from the  
VI International  
Conference,  
held at Renaca,  
Chile**

September 2004  
Photos by G. Lee and  
H. Scothorn

Marshall Weisler and Keith Dobney



Co-chair of the conference, Chris Stevenson



Keynote Speaker, Atholl Anderson, at the podium

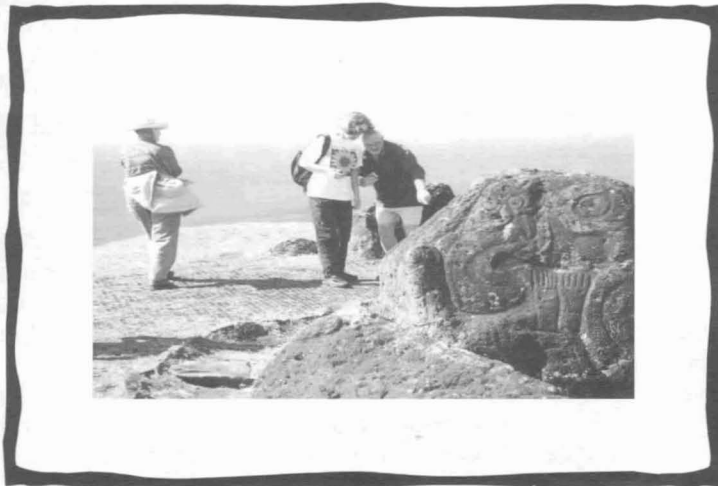


The post-conference tour was a huge success and a good time was had by all. Here is part of the tour group, yakking it up at Vinapu's wonderful site, while the cameras click away.



Carol Ivory (Washington State University) and Robin Wright (Burke Museum, University of Washington) try out the new gate at Orongo.

José Miguel Ramírez, co-chair of the conference, seen here at the podium in Reñaca, was made an honorary fellow of the EIF.



Everyone oohed and aaahed over Orongo's petroglyphs



Party animals at 'Anakena. Ann Altman whoops it up.



The tour "gang" marching off to see more of the island's wonderful sites.



of Rapa Nui that has not been much investigated. They found evidence of palm forests that were cut down, the burning of palm roots, and the planting of sweet potatoes in planting pits. I joined them on Poike when, during the post-conference tour, they demonstrated all the features in a soil profile that allowed them to paint such a complete picture of the agricultural practices on this high plateau. I could easily imagine a group of Rapanui cooking their food in a palm-root *umu* while watching *moai* being erected at Tongariki and hearing, in the far distance, the hammering of workers in the crater quarry.

The session ended with the presentation of a "Far-from-Equilibrium" model of the historic changes on Rapa Nui by John Flenley. The model was complicated but convincing and its predictions for our own society are not encouraging. The session on Anthropology and History began with a talk about the first French missionaries on Rapa Nui, some of whose reports are now available in English from the Easter Island Foundation in *Early Visitors*, and it ended with a flamboyant talk by the flamboyant Grant McCall about relations between the Rapanui and the Government of Chile. There are some very serious issues in this regard that deserve serious attention, which they received in other talks, in particular, a talk by Riet Delsing. The most important issue is the 1888 "treaty" between Rapanui chiefs and the Chilean Navy captain, Policarpo Toro. The translation of the treaty in Rapanui has a very different meaning to the Rapanui than the Spanish version does to the Chileans. As a metaphor, the Rapanui say that the chiefs gave the Chileans a handful of grass but showed the Chileans a handful of dirt, which they were keeping for themselves. Thus, the Rapanui implied that they were allowing the Chileans to use the land but the Rapanui retained ownership. The problem of land distribution and ownership is the most contentious issue on Rapa Nui today and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

The session on Language and Culture in Polynesia ended with three important talks about the linguistic heritage of Rapa Nui. Viki Haoa spoke about the survival of the Rapanui language and the immersion program that now exists from kindergarten to fourth grade. Olaug Andreassen, from the University of New South Wales, discussed her interviews with young Rapanui and their views about speaking their native language. Elders discourage them from speaking Rapanui on the island, but they like to speak Rapanui to each other on the mainland since they can do so without being understood by Chileans. This was followed by a talk by Miki Makihara about her proposed oral archive. These three talks made a deep impression both on me and Marla Wold. Marla is in charge of the EIF's scholarship program for young Rapanui to help fund their studies on the mainland. We agreed that the main future thrust of the EIF should be divided between support of contemporary education (the scholarships,

for example) and the support of Rapanui education in Rapanui. I am planning to work with Miki and Viki in an effort to get funding from larger and richer foundations than the EIF.

In addition to the conference sessions, we were treated to excellent meals and, on Friday night, a demonstration of Chilean national dances. Some members of the audience participated, with the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Valparaíso cutting a particularly fine figure. A trip to the Fonck Museum, home of the Fonck collection of Rapanui artifacts, was followed by a tour of Valparaíso. Arriving at a high vantage point with a view over the city and the bay in the early evening, many of us were easily persuaded to buy the alpaca ponchos that were on display in the open air. The evening ended with a banquet in a seafood restaurant, where dishes appeared and wine bottles were opened almost without interruption for three hours.

The next morning some of us set off for Rapa Nui and others left for home. Those who missed the four-day trip to Rapa Nui missed an important part of the conference. Traveling from site to site in small buses, more of us became friends than had been possible at the meeting. There were many interesting discussions of the archaeological sites. Those who had been to

Rapa Nui before gained in their understanding and those who saw it for the first time were awed. Marla and I did a little "business", visiting the school and the Governor, making connections and establishing goodwill.

The final treat was a barbecue on the beach at 'Anakena, under swaying palms that seemed likely to drop a few coconuts on our heads. During an exciting performance by one of the local Rapanui dance groups, I had the pleasure of dancing under the palms with an extraordinarily handsome Rapanui.

In a few years, we shall meet again for the Seventh International Conference. I hope that those who did not come to Viña will join us. Perhaps by then Professor Love will have solved the mystery of the moving of the *moai*.....

**CHRIS STEVENSON ADDS:** AS MENTIONED IN THE LAST ISSUE of the RNJ, the *Sixth International Conference on Rapa Nui and the Pacific* was a great success with over 85 papers/presentations delivered to a large audience in Viña del Mar, Chile. It was a well-executed cooperative endeavor between the EIF and the University of Valparaíso, Chile. One of the most successful aspects of the event was the on-site capability of simultaneous translation that greatly facilitated the participation of Chilean and Rapa Nui scholars. I was skeptical about this but have been converted into a true believer about its necessity in all future EIF conferences.

Stay tuned for an announcement of our next meeting. We have been invited by Helene Martinsson-Wallin and Paul Wallin to Gotland University, Sweden, August 2007.



José Miguel Ramírez and Christopher Stevenson "wrap things up" at the conference's farewell dinner in Reñaca.